

BY SARAH STEPHENS

**B**eing a fanatic of campfire ghost stories and “true” tales of haunted houses, Erica Bailey’s **THE HOUSE THAT WAS HAUNTED BEFORE IT WAS BUILT** naturally grabbed my attention. In case you’re wondering, yes, this is (kind of) an actual house and, no, it’s not really haunted — at least not in the *Poltergeist* sense.

In Bailey’s words, “To say that this house was haunted before it was built is to acknowledge that a house is the culmination of all the houses in which we have ever dwelt. More than a physical space, it is a space constituted through memory and imagination.”

In the University of Cincinnati’s College of DAAP atrium (also the café), Bailey has constructed and decorated, inside and out, a two-story house that people are encouraged to enter and explore. Custom wallpaper, which references the house itself, covers the wall leading up the stairs to the second floor. Space gradually closes in on itself in the claustrophobic upper level. Arriving there, just about all you can do is poke your head through a hatch to

peek into the attic. Here the space reopens as you peer upon a diorama that allows bird’s-eye view of the house’s imagined setting — a mundane rural landscape adjacent to the highway (picture any old, isolated Illinois farmhouse along I-74 West).

But just because this house isn’t *truly* haunted doesn’t mean it’s not creepy. It leaves you feeling slightly unsettled, lonely even. This reaction should come as no surprise to the artist, who says that “there is no invading spirit, but rather the house itself is the source of the strangeness.

In the house, physical space corresponds to psychological space, and as such, is fragmented, discontinuous and indeterminate.”

In the words of an esteemed colleague, it’s “super cool.”

(Bailey’s MFA thesis exhibition opens 7-9 p.m. Friday at UC’s College of DAAP and continues through May 27.)



PHOTO: GRAHAM LIENHART

**FOCAL POINT** turns a critical lens on a singular work of art. Through Focal Point we slow down, reflect on one work and provide a longer look.

52 • May 16-22, 2007

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